{ See Note at end. }

UNITY

CHURCH-DOOR PULPIT,

FOR

FREEDOM, FELLOWSHIP AND CHARACTER IN RELIGION.

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RIGHT AND WRONG IN BELIEF.

BY REV. JOSEPH MAY.

James ii, 19. "Thou believest that there is one God?—thou doest well! the devils also believe—and tremble!"

All teachers of religion agree in this: that the object of their mission is to bring men to the truth. There may be however two contrasted methods for effecting this. You may, on the one hand, exert yourself to arouse and quicken conscience by all natural means, exciting the sense of responsibility, the sentiment of duty, and showing the importance of possessing truth, yet not claiming the right to declare for men in advance particulars of doctrine in which the essential truth is finally to be identified.

Or you may, on the other hand, having convinced yourself that essential truth is comprehended in certain propositions, devote yourself to advocating these, and make it your chief object to secure men's assent to them.

In practice, either of these methods will occasionally seem to borrow of the other. He who goes out to propagate a system of doctrine will often try to arouse conscience, hoping to lead it to a particular conclusion; nor is he precluded from urging, incidentally, other good things such as the amendment of life and excellence of character. And he whose object it is to arouse men to value truth and pursue it for themselves, will yet cherish views of his own which he will be at liberty to present—nay, which it will be his duty to proclaim, while respecting the individuality of those to whom he speaks.

Yet the two systems are essentially discordant; and even these interchanges of method are only seeming.

You recognize the two systems as respectively those of LIBERALISM and ORTHODOXY. Obviously they are fundamentally distinguished by their diverging views of the nature, function and value of *belief*.

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Now the importance of belief, according to the orthodox understanding of it, is shown in the very name Ortho-doxy, which means correctness of opinion according to an established standard. It is the thing which, as religionists, the orthodox aim at first and last. Their views are in every case reduced to compendious statements called *creeds;* and members of the communion are held to *believe* these, or, however holy their manner of conversation, however wise and learned they may be, they are rejected as members.

Every effort is made to keep their minds fixed in the moulds of these established formulas. Doubt of them is represented as reprehensible,—at least as a bad condition of mind to be resolutely put down by will power. Disbelief of them is stigmatized by a word which in its genuine signification is the unhappiest in the language—infidelity: as if he had lost *all* faith, who discards the established creed. Finally, belief of the orthodox dogmas is the door of acceptance with God, who is to bestow salvation on such as manifest it and on these alone.

In the whole system there is no legitimate recognition of the value of holy living as a means of revealing truth to man, or as the legitimate and characteristic result of true belief. To obtain the belief is the object of the labors of the orthodox religionist; and no independent conclusions of the private mind can be recognized as of any value. Freedom of the mind is discredited. If any encouragement is given to righteousness it is incidentally and extraneously.

Of course, very many orthodox men and orthodox preachers are better than consistency with such a system would make them; and yet I think that, through mere familiarity with them, we fail probably to estimate the lowering effect upon the moral condition of society which such principles and the methods of utterance to which they lead actually produce. It is a terrible suggestion to offer men, that anything but *Godliness* can make us acceptable to God:—and yet this is the habitual affirmation of the popular religious system of our time. The forms in which it is expressed,—too commonly to be considered exceptional—and characteristic, because legitimate outgrowths of the fundamental principle of orthodoxy, are often shocking to the last degree.

For example: a few years ago, the then most popular of orthodox preachers in the country declared in his pulpit and afterwards printed the words:

"*This is our danger, not that we shall be sinful, not that we shall be imperfect, not that we shall be vain, not that we shall be foolish, not that we shall be corrupt in our imaginations, but that we shall not believe in Christ. Our salvation is not half so much imperilled by wickedness as by unbelief!*"

So, more lately, from another, an active revivalist, I read these words: "It is nothing to be *religious:* it is everything to be a *Christian.*"

What would Jesus say to such a follower as that? You have heard it: "*Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the Kingdom; but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in Heaven. Many will say unto me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name, and in thy name have cast out devils, and in thy name done many wonderful works: and then will I declare unto them, I never knew you, depart from me, ye that work iniquity.*"

The aim of orthodoxy then, is to secure conformity, correctness of belief according to a fixed standard, in order to secure to the believer future happiness.

The aim of liberal religion may be said to be *mental rectitude,* a just and true condition of mind and thought: in order to produce in men *moral rectitude,*—upright, holy characters and lives.

Now the orthodox position implies at least two things: 1st, That it is within a man's power of choice what he shall or shall not believe.

2d, That correctness of opinion is a good thing, without regard to the means by which it is secured.

Liberalism declares on the contrary that belief is not a thing subject to choice; and again, that while it is desirable to attain to opinions corresponding as nearly as possible to absolute truth, no opinion and no faith is worth anything, unless it is arrived at justly according to the natural laws of the mind.

It may be worth our while to examine the operations of the mind and discriminate if we can, what is the true significance of this word belief, and some of the conditions of the mental act.

Observe, then, that in regard to every proposition, or idea, the mind may stand in any one of several attitudes or relations.

1st, *Absolute Nescience.* A fact may be so wholly beyond the reach of our faculties, an idea may be so unverifiable by our reason, that we do and can know nothing about it.

For example: The place where the departed of our race dwell: this is something in respect to which we can and do know nothing, we are absolutely ignorant about it. As finite beings it would appear that they must have location. Yet perhaps their mode of existence is such that they have no relation to place in any sense intelligible to us. The subject is one beyond the possibility even of investigation. Even conjecture is vain. We are absolutely in the dark.

Exactly opposite to Nescience is, of course, knowledge. Absolute or perfect knowledge is a thing we can seldom if ever possess. We use the term, however, properly, wherever our apprehension of a matter is such and so complete that it appears irrational to suppose that further evidence or reflection could possible alter our conviction. We apply the term especially to what is reported by our senses or our self-consciousness. Also, to whatever proposition is supported by such and so much evidence that we cannot conceive it to be reversed, or qualified. We know that we are here assembled. We know that American Independence was declared in Philadelphia on the 4th day of July, 1776. We know that water is compounded of two gases.

But between nescience and knowledge lie a whole range of topics in regard to which our state of mind is more or less characterized by uncertainty; either because the evidence is essentially, or practically, inadequate: or because our faculties are inadequate to the task of investigation: or because we have not actually followed the chain of investigation or reasoning which should bring us to a certain conclusion. And according to the different degrees of certainty at which we arrive in either case, we characterize our different states of mind as doubt, conjecture, opinion, belief.

Are the fixed stars inhabited? Who were the original inhabitants of America? In what type of animal did the human race originate? These are questions to which we cannot possibly give a final answer. But we have evidence perhaps, which throws upon them some light, so that our state is not that of absolute nescience. Where this light is very little, we say we are in complete doubt; the most we can do is to form a conjecture. As we have more evidence, available by our minds, so that we may allow our ideas to take a somewhat defined shape, we acknowledge our uncertainty, and call our view, perhaps, an *opinion.* If, finally, either one of us individually feels that he has so thoroughly investigated a subject, is possessed of so much evidence on it, as to produce in his mind an irresistible conviction, which he is fully convinced will stand the test of all future evidence,—this state of mind we call *belief.* Belief implies that final certification is not yet attained; perhaps it may be unattainable: but that *all attainable evidence has been exhausted* and that it is so much in quantity, and its tenor is such, that we feel justified in accepting, or rather feel obliged to accept, a particular decision as final. We are forced to admit the *possibility* that entire acquaintance with the subject might consistently with reason, alter our views; but

we feel entirely sure that this would not happen. Belief, in a word, is practical certitude. Perhaps I may call it provisional knowledge. All through life it plays for us the part of knowledge. In fact, there are many more things, I should think, which we believe, than which we know. Belief is the great step in education; for as a substitute for perfect knowledge, it becomes the basis of action; so that we put to practical test the results of reflection, observation, and investigation. We never willingly act on lower degrees of conviction. When we have to trust to conjecture, we say we take the risk. When we *believe*, we put aside the idea of risk, that is, uncertainty, altogether. In belief we are *sure;* yet admitting that it is theoretically possible we should be wrong.

It is obvious, then, that so long as there remains uncertainty in our mind we do not believe: therefore we do not believe if we voluntarily overlook evidence, or if we refrain from applying to the subject in hand any faculty of which we are possessed by which the evidence can be discussed and digested. The existence of further uninvestigated evidence reduces belief to conjecture or doubt.

And now let us carefully determine just what all these different states of mind, as we call them, actually are. Observe then, that *they are the instinctive, involuntary response of the mind to evidence.* In other words, since evidence is any means by which the truth is made clear, that is, 'evident,' to us, these states of mind, nescience, doubt, belief, knowledge, are the relations, the positive relations, of the mind to truth. The mind in investigation of a subject acts the part of a mirror held before some truth of fact or thought. When there is no light at all cast by evidence upon the subject, there is no image in the mirror, the mind contains nothing corresponding to the point in question. This is *nescience.* When there is a little light, so that an image is more or less dimly seen, but its outline is too vague to be confidently traced, this is *doubt.* When the evidence is so strong that the image comes out clear, with no deficiency so far as appears to our vision, and yet we have reason to suppose that more evidence is attainable, which might in some way—though we are confident it would not—alter the image, this is *belief.* When the image is so clear, when the evidence is such that we feel doubt to be not only impossible, but irrational, this we call *knowledge.*

The first point growing out of our discussion thus far, then, is this: Since truth is absolute and nescience, doubt, belief, knowledge are only the passive responses of the mind to it, neither of them is a voluntary state. That is to say, you cannot honestly or safely *choose* which you will be in. You can only *recognize which you are in.* To refuse to do so is to falsify—as Ananias acted a lie before Peter.

In fact the only way in which a rational mind can voluntarily affect its actual position in regard to the recognition of truth is by choosing what evidence it will consider. But this you may not do. In practical affairs willfully to shut out evidence in forming our opinion is called dishonest. In abstract thought to do so is no less a false and injurious mental act. Mental rectitude requires us to examine all attainable evidence, and to acknowledge precisely what its effect upon our individual minds actually *is.*

On the other hand, to assume that you believe when you have not examined the evidence, or where the evidence is not sufficient, in the case of your mind, to produce complete conviction, this is equally a false mental operation. You are then pretending to have done what you have not done; you are acting a lie; you are substituting for the divine light of truth a base counterfeit of your own concocting.

So, either way, you have, as I have proved, no *choice* in the matter consistent with honesty and safety. To secure *all* evidence; to use *every* faculty in studying

the image cast by its means upon your mind; this is the only genuine thing you can do—it is the only thing you can really do; anything else is false, delusive and a pretense.

But now it is clear wherein the *moral* quality of belief or doubt, that which makes a belief right or wrong to hold, must consist. It is not in the form of our convictions, nor in their clearness, but depends upon the thoroughness and sincerity with which we arrive at them. The result, when our minds are directed to the contemplation of truth, is one over which we have no control. In itself, therefore, it is neither right nor wrong; it has no moral, only an intellectual quality. All rectitude in the matter inheres to those voluntary efforts by which we arrive at it: in the honesty or the dishonesty, the thoroughness or the carelessness, which we have observed in securing and examining the evidence attainable, and in digesting its contents. Our moral obligation in regard to our opinions is simply this:—we are bound to make our relation to all truth as just and complete as is possible to us. Hence we may never willfully accept an imperfect apprehension where it lies in our power to have a more perfect one. We may never rest voluntarily in conjecture where we might have assured belief: nor in belief where we might have knowledge. To do so is a sin.

Will you have an illustration?

Suppose an engine-driver, approaching a bridge, sees something which excites in his mind a suspicion that the draw is open. Shall he voluntarily rest in the conjecture, however probable, that it is shut? Shall he even trust to the strongest belief short of certainty, and dash ahead? Or shall he stop his train and send forward to make sure?

"To dash ahead would be a crime," you say, "if the least doubt be in his mind."

But mark: Suppose he does this, and yet, the draw being closed, no accident occurs,—would he not still be guilty of a sin? Certainly:—the sin was really consummated when he resolved to go ahead. The consequence, favorable or unfavorable, may save a severe penalty to him, but it cannot alter his responsibility in the sight of God, or of man either. His guilt consisted in *neglecting to secure all possible light upon his situation.*

I may use this illustration to conduct me to my next point. Suppose although the engineer himself doubted, yet his fireman should be wholly sure of the safety of the bridge, and the engineer should then say, "Well, I adopt your opinion as my own. My belief is that the draw is open: you believe it to be shut; I transfer your belief to myself and I will go ahead." Would any jury listen a moment to his plea that he acted in this way, as a justification for his conduct? Not a moment! The jury would laugh at it. "You cannot take another man's belief for your own in that way," they would say. "You might have sent your fireman out to observe, and if you had confidence in him, his report would be evidence to you. But his belief could not be transferred to you, so as to become yours, except through your study of the grounds on which it was based. It was your duty to collect all available evidence, and to weigh it before you acted."

It is very certain that while multitudes will follow religious teachers who set aside all the laws of reason, they will never ride on railroads whose officials do so!

We see, then, from these illustrations that all belief is essentially an *individual matter.* So is nescience, doubt, knowledge. For each is *a state of a mind*, of an individual mind. It is the response of some actual, living mental faculties, to evidence.

But now: since no two minds are constituted alike, or situated alike, this follows:—*that this response will vary in different cases:* in fact that it never can be absolutely identical in any two cases. To one mind the evidence will appear decisive which to another appears inconclu-

sive. To one it will seem to prove one thing: to another it may seem to prove something different. I may think I see a ghost: you may be certain it is only a white sheet. The result, therefore, will be that the same evidence produces in different minds, doubt or belief, nescience or knowledge. And either is right, either is honorable, either is safe, either is an acceptable offering to the God of Truth, according, and according only, as it is the result of careful sincere examination of the evidence by each individual mind.

To force beliefs upon other minds, therefore, to induce them to accept them by any process except that of evidence leading to freely formed convictions, is obviously in essence a crime. To do so is to lead men to act falsely: to deceive themselves, perhaps, with the notion that they have done what they have not done. To make a man "believe" that Christ is his Savior by getting him into a heated room, among an excited crowd of men and women; to get him to announce his conclusion then and there, so that it is hard for him to recede: this is to deceive him, to betray and bejuggle him. Any opinion not arrived at justly and with proper deliberation is, in its relations to the mind a delusion and a falsehood; and though it be true in form, and of the highest importance in itself considered, it will produce the effect of falsehood, in proportion to the falsity of the spirit and process by which it has been adopted. The first effect will be to make all such opinions barren of true fruits, and whereas a true belief always issues spontaneously in character and life, these falsely acquired ones are only artificial flowers which never develop into fruit. And those who are led to believe on Christ under unnatural excitation, through subserviency to others' powerful exhortations, to prevailing sentiments,—in *any way* save that of the genuine drawing of their own souls to him in intelligent confidence and love, seldom show much of his spirit in their lives. They only say "I go, Sir" —but really they "go not." How can they know, or show, anything of his real truth?

We conclude, then, from this discussion, that the reception of any particular belief or opinion, however correct in itself, can never be made an obligation upon any mind. *To attain truth* is an obligation, but this must be, for it only can be by obeying the laws of the mind and recognizing the condition and position of one's own mind. And this appears clearly then; that, as we cannot attain truth by deceiving ourselves, but only by clearly recognizing our genuine relation to it, we must often acknowledge in regard to some most solemn subject that we *doubt*, or that we *disbelieve*, or that we *do not know*. So to do, may be to recognize and confess the truth,—*to be true*. This is why the poet exclaims—

> "There lives more faith in honest doubt,
> Believe me, than in half the creeds,"—

because in assenting to creeds men so commonly deceive and do violence to their own souls.

But there remains a step which I cannot help taking.

What is the use of knowing the truth? of believing the truth? Why should we do or care anything about it?

Obviously, because truth means the facts of our nature and our position in the moral and spiritual universe, and the principles which underlie them, and if these have any validity, we must be in right relations to them, if we are to flourish, if we are to be right or safe and happy. Our object in knowing, or seeking to know truth is that we may place ourselves in such right relations. It is not a matter of intellectual satisfaction, merely. We get no food by merely standing off and looking at truth. St. James almost sneers as he says, "Thou believest that there is one God?—thou doest well! the devils also *believe*,—and tremble!" So the shrewdly pious Thomas à Kempis says, "What will it avail thee to discourse learnedly concerning the Trinity, if thou hast not love, and there-

fore art displeasing to the Trinity?" All the value of truth known, or believed, is that it may issue in character and life. We want to know it, that we may in our conduct respond to it, and in life and character manifest it.

Moreover it is of the quality of Truth, genuinely believed, really known, to be *felt:* and therefore to influence us, according to its character and its importance. Once know any item of truth, once believe any principle to be true, and you cannot be quite the same as if you had not known or believed. Even the devils "tremble" though they do no more.

If, therefore, we do not manifest by the amendment of character and life that we have taken the truth into our hearts and souls in this intimate manner, we have not believed unto salvation; nay, *we have not believed at all.* We may have intellectually assented; but we do not show that response of the heart to truth which follows *inevitably* upon genuine conviction—upon real belief.

Mere orthodoxy, therefore, the belief which is only the acceptance of standard propositions, *is no belief at all.*

And so, any methods which are likely or liable to impair the sincerity, the thoroughness, the carefulness of our inquiries after truth; which tend to make belief appear to be only intellectual assent; which make such mere assent a merit, a passport to divine and human favor; which tend to make men contented in stopping there, not persevering to attain the deep individual apprehension of truth which should expose them to its regenerating influence; any methods which put professions of belief, or belief itself, above character, above good life, above righteousness, holiness, purity, love—are all false to the spirit of truth, offensive to God and hostile to the true welfare of the soul.

Our "Church-Door Pulpit" hints its purpose in its name. It aims to furnish fortnightly a transfigured tract,—transfigured by being paid for, and by representing not so much a given system of beliefs as the emphasis, in somewhat varying beliefs, on "Freedom, Fellowship and Character in Religion;" this tract to be taken from the rack or table at the church-door to the home, there to serve its little mission by reading in the family, lending to a neighbor, mailing to a distant friend, etc. We hope the plan may be destined to wide adoption by Liberal churches as part of their regular church-work.

The word "UNITY" in the title bears to the Committee who arrange the series a wide meaning, pointing more to the substance, than to the forms, of religious thought and faith; and in inviting contributions they have sought, not only through the whole range, but in both directions beyond the range, of those who bear the "Unitarian" name,—though most of the writers must naturally be found within that name. "New Orthodoxy," "New Judaism," those who care for no name but "Religion," and the "Ethical Societies," will all be represented. The choice of subject is left to the writers; and *each writer is responsible for his own utterance alone, and for nothing else in the series.* "One of your best—a life-helping sermon, or a thought-sermon reaching the life," was the invitation sent out.

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